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THE POETIC DRAMA.

BY LOUISE COLLIER WILLCOX.

EACH year sends in a new dozen or so of poetic plays, showing that the form has undoubtedly come to stay. In some sort, it gives an answer to the reiterated question: "Is literature dead?" "Not dead, but hiding," is the reply; "a little overlaid by quantities of cheaply manufactured novels and, literature being essentially aristocratic, somewhat awed by ascendent democracy." In an age when an unlearned opinion can carry as far as the learned, when public-school education has made every man a mediocre critic and silenced the sound of the trained voice, it is somewhat difficult for literature to flourish exuberantly. The theory that, to enter the sacred realm, a living language must be handled as a learned instrument, depending as much upon sight and sound, upon texture, color and perfume as upon the sense it conveys, does not easily gain popularity; and, when the garment of words in which a thought is clothed is worn threadbare for the plain meanings to peep through, and the meanings are adapted to suit the masses, then literature can do no better than hide awhile and await better times. For literature, like all true art, has, as its aim, to give a very high and rare order of intellectual joy; and to say that its first aim should be to convey a fact, or tell a tale, is as dull as to fancy that a Beethoven symphony or a Rodin statue should aim at telling a story or commemorating a fact.

The revival of the poetic drama, whether its results be labelled with medals of success or tags of failure, shows at least the intent of art and as such deserves a welcome. The highest reach it has attained is in the Maeterlinckian drama, where all the differences between the earlier drama and the drama of to-day are most clearly emphasized. Here the daily course, the common

incidents, are charged with heavy meanings, and the passions are spiritualized till it seems as if eternity itself were stalking the stage. Stephen Phillips, despite the acclaim with which his plays have been received, achieved no more than the presentation of obvious, old-fashioned melodrama poetically handled.

Foremost—indeed, as far as permanent values goes, entirely alone—in this year's output stands the volume of Mr. Yeats's collected dramas.* Here is a poet who came into the world dowered with an art, and who had but to keep still until it grew to self-consciousness and uttered itself through him. As is perhaps inevitable in a sophisticated age, Mr. Yeats has also evolved a critical theory of art; but the explanatory prefaces are written to explain the poetry, not the poetry, which jets like a fountain from beneath the covering of all effort, to illustrate the theory. Two theories he offers in his preface—that without fine words there can be no literature, and that art always owes a debt to limitation. The very word "literature," as distinguished from average writing, means that substance prevails by the beauty and the value of its form. All the facts of the world are but commonplace statement till beauty transforms them; all the theory of life is but a dim cloud until visible lines are drawn. To prevail, the written word must justify itself by its ancestry, must be vivified with the strength of traditional and associational value, must have a high and noble breeding, and must link itself to beautiful harmonies with all adjoining sounds. That art gains by limitation means that the firmer, the truer, the outline which cuts off, for decoration, some bit of space from the surrounding void, the finer the art. Art is drawing lines, separating from the blank stare of the commonplace some portion of life and erecting in it an altar to beauty. The particular limitation Mr. Yeats refers to is national; his poetry is Irish in symbol and setting; the plays are compact of weird legend, the delicate and strange intuitions of a folk not yet wholly divorced from communion with the sea and the sky and the mountains, to whom dreams and visions are a part of practice, and to whom the visible life of every day is but the concealing veil of the realities that stretch beyond.

One notices in reading these six beautiful dramas the almost

* "The Poetical Works of William Butler Yeats." In two volumes, New York: The Macmillan Co. (Vol. II shortly to appear.)

imperceptible way in which Mr. Yeats steps from real life into dream life, which comes very closely linked to reality and seems to be not the hyperbole of passion, but rather a fourth dimension into which we may learn to pass at will. When he writes:

“My master will break up the sun and moon,
And quench the stars in their ancestral light,
And overturn the thrones of God and the angels,”

we remember the vehement majesty of Marlowe when he touched the forces of nature; but we get a m^ore delicate touch in:

“He who could bend all things to His will
Has covered the door of the infinite fold
With the pale stars and the wandering moon.”

When he writes:

“Did but the lawless angels see that door,
They would fall, *slain by everlasting peace*,”

he gives us a profoundly metaphysical conception of how the turbulent and restless forces of life must be ultimately caught and stilled in the meshes of the great, white, unfluttering veil of Quiet. Somewhat the same idea is touched again when he says:

“By love alone
It is God binds us to Himself and to the hearth,
And shuts us from the waste beyond His peace,
From maddening freedom and bewildering light.”

Mr. Yeats's world is a Celtic world, full of signs and omens; through the dramas go the crane that starves at the full of the moon because he is afraid of his own shadow and the glitter of water, the deer with no horns and the dying fawn, the death-pale deer and the boar with no bristles—all full of portent to those alert for signals. Another point to note is the skill with which Mr. Yeats combines the concrete and the abstract concept. This is an effect much in use in the young Shakespeare; and in Mr. Yeats's work it is a swift way of bringing the visionary world into habitual life. He writes:

“I have lived now, near ninety winters, child,
And I have known three things no doctor cures,—
Love, Loneliness and Famine.”

Here Famine is ennobled by its connection with the proud company of Love and Loneliness.

Again:

"Dear Heart, make a soft cradle of old tales
And songs and music;"

or:

"There is no medicine but Gabriel's trump.
Till it has ended parting and old age,
And hail and rain and famine and foolish laughter."

One notes throughout the work the extraordinary beauty of the similes drawn from nature:

"And dance upon the mountain like a flame;"

"Dance like a wave of the sea;"

"Her face was pale as water before dawn."

The last has, indeed, the drawback of echoing:

"Her eyes were deeper than the depths
Of water stilled at even."

But it is not the little flowers of diction one would commend in these six exquisite dramas, but rather the unified and profound feeling for life and art:

"I said the poets hung
Images of the life that was in Eden."

This last quality, together with his freedom of the dream dimension, his familiarity with folk-lore and symbolism, his felicitous combinations of concrete and abstract imagery, his mental attitude ever keenly aware of those incarnate, wavering impulses that make the mischief and the witchery and the rhythm of life, is a rich endowment for any poet; but Mr. Yeats has another gift, a rarer, and to those who understand, a dearer, the mystic's sense of the riches hid in silence:

"And more I may not write of; for they that cleave
The waters of sleep can make a chattering tongue
Heavy like stone, their wisdom being half silence."

To turn to Hardy's "The Dynasts"* is to turn from poetry to prose; for "The Dynasts" may be history or it may be philosophy, but what it assuredly is not is poetry. One has but to compare with Mr. Yeats's fairies these supernatural beings, the spirits of the years, of the pities, the spirits sinister and ironic, the spirits of rumor, the messengers, the recording angel and the spirit of the earth—all of them so sadly versed in Schopenhauer's philosophy—to realize that they have won no freedom from hu-

* "The Dynasts." By Thomas Hardy. Part II. The Macmillan Co.

man limitations, and that they are living with us in a worn, commonplace, perfectly matter-of-fact world.

Whatever the subject-matter of drama—and Ibsen has shown us that it may be social complexity, Bernard Shaw that it may be revolutionary doctrine, and Maeterlinck that it may be the most delicate and subtle of intuitions—its form must be as perfect as that of a sonnet. Its artistic perfection must depend upon some underlying unity which bands together into one action, with its rise and fall, all the incidents and characters of the play, “as if,” says Pater, “a song or ballad were still lying at the root of it.” Mr. Hardy has given us here, in a play of three parts, nineteen acts and one hundred and thirty scenes, all the dust and débris of a life-long study of Napoleon and his times. But Napoleon himself is not big enough to hold together the sprawling events of his age; and, interesting as this drama is, whenever Mr. Hardy’s Wessex peasant comes forward, delightful as it is to hear again the spirits of the air giving discursive comment upon life in the manner of the great novelist, the drama can make no claim to artistic completeness.

The next volume of plays* is from an American pen. In opening it, we cannot but wonder if a sentence of Pater’s determined Mrs. Dargan’s choice in the first drama, of which Henry III is the hero. Pater says of him:

“A frightened soul . . . doting on all that was alien from his father’s huge ferocity, on the genialities, the soft gilding, on the genuine interests of art and poetry, to be credited more than any other person with the deep religious expression of Westminster Abbey, Henry the Third, picturesque though useless, but certainly touching, might have furnished Shakespeare, had he filled up this interval in his series with precisely the kind of effect he tends towards in his English plays.”

The effect which Shakespeare tends toward is one that Mrs. Dargan, with her leaning toward happy endings, just misses—namely, that of the pity and the irony of life, standing out the more glaringly when the ills to which we are all of us heirs together fall blighting upon high and conspicuous persons. But, although she has quite missed this effect, she has written dramas with an admirable command of technique, a good understanding of plot and structure, and more than ordinary felicity of phrase. There are phrases painfully reminiscent of more classic

* “Lords and Lovers and Other Dramas.” By Olive Tilford Dargan. Charles Scribner’s Sons. 1906.

utterances, and there are explanatory lines that are too obvious; but the result remains a high achievement. If one were asked to say wherein the chief weakness lay, one would feel that one had acquired no new or individual point of view from the reading, and that there was no serious comment upon life. Mrs. Dargan has immersed herself in Elizabethan drama, and her plays show no touch of the tremendous advance of thought which marks our own century.

"Abelard and Héloïse"* is disappointing when one reflects upon what one demands of so high a theme. The ejaculatory method of speech in the first twenty pages is nothing less than exasperating, and one wonders if no one will ever stand still long enough to utter a finished sentence. Doubtless this is a concession to stage production, but it is ruinous to a reading play. The character of Abelard is so weak and vacillating as to make the love of Héloïse seem unworthy. Her indomitable energy and will, her living faith in that life projected beyond all creeds, the life of God in man, loses its force when we conceive it as inspired by so poor a creature as Abelard.

Last year brought us Mr. Percy Mackaye's "Fenriss the Wolf." In "Jeanne d'Arc,"† this year, Mr. Mackaye has produced an excellent poetical drama eminently fitted for the stage. The visual faculty is always remarkable in Mr. Mackaye's work, and this play shows distinct advance in ease and dexterity of handling blank verse; the line has gained both in plasticity and distinction, and the exuberances of fantastic individuality are well reined in. It is a relief to exchange the average dead-level speech of the stage for Jeanne's description of the armed soldiers:

"And all their shining limbs were stiff with steel,
And rank by rank they rattled as they marched."

Of the "Sappho and Phaon,"‡ one cannot speak with so wholehearted an appreciation, for here once more Mr. Mackaye's fantasticality runs riot. The play proper is a play in a play of a play. We are first introduced to excavators of Herculanum in the near future; the American enthusiast drops asleep and dreams of Horace and Virgil, who are planning to see a tragedy

* "Abelard and Héloïse." By Ridgely Torrence. Charles Scribner's Sons. 1907.

† "Jeanne d'Arc." By Percy Mackaye. New York: The Macmillan Co. 1906.

‡ "Sappho and Phaon." By Percy Mackaye. The Macmillan Co.

by Varius enacted. After certain episodes with the actors, the play proper, "Sappho and Phaon," 600 B.C., begins; but the change of time rends the unity of the whole. Mr. Mac-kaye has woven into his play a number of the Sapphic fragments with ingenuity, but not always in a way to meet our preconceived ideas. To remember the gorgeous "Anactoria" of Swinburne and the fragment that inspired it, and compare it with the same fragment woven into the play, is far from soul-satisfying.

Last, but not least, we welcome another drama from Mrs. Drummond, who last year gave us "The Alcestis." Mrs. Drummond is an essentially feminine poet of fine insight and delicate sensibility. The chief gain in "The Coming of Philibert"* is in dramatic action and force. The subtle thesis of the power of nobility to awaken an echo even in the most ignoble and unwonted breasts is well carried out in this return of the King's twin brother to the court, after a youth spent in the forest in the companionship of a scholar of monastic tendencies. There are delightful lyrics in the play and charming bits of poetic description. Mrs. Drummond's is a future to which one may look forward with interest and expectation.

There is one demand that all true art makes of its votaries, self-sacrifice. No real poetry is written in the comfortable interims of a pleasant life. It will be written with sweat and blood, or it remains mere versification. The deeper meanings of life with which poetry deals can be known only to those who have ceased to cower before any experience, however blasting, and are revealed to those alone who are brave enough to beckon the larger sorrows of the world to them. Poetical feeling is but a framework into which the artist must set thoughtful passion and passionate thought.

"Him who trembles before the flame and the flood
And the winds that blow through the starry ways,
Let the starry winds and the flame and the flood
Cover over and hide, for he has no part
With the proud, majestic multitude."

LOUISE COLLIER WILLCOX.

* "The Coming of Philibert." By Sara King Wiley. The Macmillan Co. 1907.